

## Alexandria, My Mediterranean

*Edwar Al-Kharrat*

*For me the white sea is not an equivalent or symbol of mother or woman; I do not hurl myself into its billows as a man may throw himself upon the tender, welcoming bosom of his wife, or as a child curls up on its mother's lap, and its waves are not the spot I come to seeking security, the place where I enjoy rest, giving myself up to the loving embrace.*

*And though it works an irresistible charm on me, it is rather in the guise of a strict father that it appears, even in its moments of calm and serenity. It is a restless, disturbing being whose wrath follows swiftly on the heels of its wavelets' tranquil shimmering, a being whose depths I have never been able to plumb, and never will, hidden as they are below a surface that is by turns peaceful and raging. But I cannot keep away from its spell. I approach, very cautiously, then draw back, and come near once more.*

*Its call obsesses me, and nothing can prevail against the sirens' seductive song, neither stopping my ears with wax, nor lashing myself to the mast of Ulysses' ship . . .*

*The echo of its waves pounding the white stones of the eastern harbour still resonates in me, from my earliest youth, and I still feel on my face and neck the dampness of the mist that soaked the luminous winter mornings.*

*In the harbour the ships' horns are still booming in the long night of memory, with a heavy melancholy, but also in consolation, their music reaching me in my room in the Ragheb Pacha district, even though it is some way from the harbour, as I am reading Conrad and Tagore, wrapped in my bedcovers in the middle of New Year's night; I feel as if the Mediterranean is coming into the room and observing the thoughts of the young man I was – maybe still am – dreaming of love, learning and wanting to penetrate the mystery of the universe.*

*At the time when I thought of myself as a poet, I used to go down on Fridays, on clear winter mornings, as far as the beach along Stanley Bay. My eyes wandered over the climbing plants on the sea wall; those shoots clutching the masonry with their fragile ends told me something about the beauty of the world that was both heart-rending and consoling . . . I would walk along the edge of sea, alongside the waves, letting the spray wet my face, plunging into the maelstrom of my amorous daydreams, which mirrored the swirls in the little pools of foaming water between the rocks made by the advancing sea enclosed in shining*

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*basins reflecting the sky's image in miniature. I would contemplate the waves' frothing border, murmuring in obsessive, perpetual movement, and think vaguely about the eternal nature of those waves, those rocks, that beach, which had been there since time immemorial and would still be there when I was no longer around to see them . . . didn't I say I saw myself as a poet?*

*From the matt grey surface of the sea a rock emerged that was wide at the base and I told myself it was the rock of reality rising above the waves of dreams and desire. One day I saw it completely covered with gulls that had landed there like a dense white cloud, pressed up against one another, their bills thrust into their feathers and their wings folded back along their bodies. They simply turned into a soft white mass, like the female manifestation of the world's flesh, and I would have liked to swim out there to plunge into its tender warm softness.*

*The colours of the sea would change with the passing of a cloud that hid the sun for a moment, and they took on violet, blue, silvery, sometimes bright reddish hues; the expanse of the sea was calm, the hiss of the little flashing waves was scarcely audible. I seemed to hear the resonance of the silence that alone disturbed, or rather from time to time enhanced, the cheeping of tiny birds hopping about on the sand and darting their beaks into the seaweed and shells. Far off, hardly perceptible, a voice was calling out names on the Corniche road: 'Sayyed . . . Hassouna . . .' Right at the far end of the beach I could see the vague outline of a couple of lovers . . . What passion, what dumb desire had brought them to that deserted shore that morning?*

*On the frontier between sand and waves, damp green foam at once turned white as the wave retreated, then was covered once more . . . I thought: 'eternity, permanence, versus our impermanence, our finiteness'.*

*That Mediterranean shore is long, drawn out, fragile, existing between fullness and void, a place busy with intense life between the sea and the Libyan desert, like a narrow, slim waist you think is about to break at any moment . . . It is a shore that cannot huddle behind protective screens, and yet it has never broken, since time immemorial it has been there, it was there in the pharaohs' time, then in the age of Alexander and the Ptolemies, the Arabs, and right up to our own . . . It is a wavy line alongside a bottomless abyss, whose deceptive tranquillity is great with threats of storms, but whose bewitching beauty too defies any comprehensive description. That splendour of the sea holds out its arms to me and calls me with a fatal cry . . . It is there, on that fragile, tormented shore forming the border between life and nothingness, that my country lies in which I cannot settle.*

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Cairo

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell